

# *The Crisis of Liberalism and the Emergence of Federal Populism*

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The bankruptcy of liberalism has been forecast so often that a sense of impending doom has become part of its very definition. The various crises prefiguring its demise, however, have only triggered structural adjustments resulting primarily in more efficient versions of the same basic system. Frustration with this political collapse which never came has generated an opposite, equally mistaken, attitude. Thus during the last decade many of the doomsday radicals of the 1960s have become fervent believers in liberalism's eternal validity. Fundamental Enlightenment values, which were already part and parcel of most radicals' *Weltanschauung*, have ceased to be lofty ideals to be realized in a future social order of "freedom, equality and fraternity" and, instead, are now seen as already embodied in existing institutions requiring only fine tuning to function effectively in this, the best of all possible worlds.

Both these ahistorical approaches fail to take into account the modifications liberalism has undergone in order to survive, how it has gradually changed from an anarchic to a statist system, and the fragility of some of the means it has deployed to solve major structural crises. Its weakest feature, democratic legitimacy, which has been mistakenly assumed to be an integral part of its "liberal democratic" framework, has been so systematically overlooked that, when it resurfaces as a challenge to liberalism in the form of populism, born again liberals are peculiarly incapable of dealing with it. The same goes for an increasing number of cases where anti-liberal and often authoritarian regimes are democratically elected — as in Iran, Algeria, the former Soviet Georgia, etc. — with overwhelming popular support. This is largely because the very notion



of liberalism is so confused and subject to such a variety of contradictory definitions that any political analysis which does not spell out exactly what it means is condemned to inevitable misunderstandings.

To avoid such a predicament, the following account discusses liberalism both as the New Class ideology of a significant sector of the American polity (support for a strong redistributive state apparatus, abstract individualism, a growing number of human and civil rights, universalism, scientism, etc.) and as a political philosophy predicated on constitutionalism, democratic legitimacy and the inviolability of a number of first principles embodied in the nation-state. The two meanings are historically intertwined. Yet, while in the first case it is possible to contrapose it to a "conservatism" opposed to at least some of the features of New Class ideology, in the second both liberals and conservatives can be regarded "liberal." Conservatives, in fact, are committed to the same "liberal democratic" system, which they contrapose to alternatives such as bureaucratic collectivism or Islamic fundamentalism based on different principles such as transcendental truth and legitimated by the future social orders they promise to bring about.

When contraposed to New Class ideology, populism as a *Weltanschauung* can only mean popular sovereignty and the privileging of democratic legitimacy over and above all other political tenets, no matter how solidly grounded they may claim to be. Thus the recent resurgence of populism is not merely a temporary aberration but an expression of the modern political predicament, which since before WWI has been vitiated by a series of exceptional but now increasingly obsolescent historical conditions. As a response to particular political problems, however, populist politics are also historically contingent and, within different contexts, assume a variety of idiosyncratic configurations. The following analysis attempts to explain why the present crisis of liberalism — both as an ideology and as a political system — requires populist responses to emphasize federalism, regionalism and the dismantling of predominant New Class modes of domination.

Unfortunately, populism is not blessed with a rich theoretical tradition. Its meaning is all but obvious and usually associated with its pre-modern manifestations predicated on the primacy of ethnicity, religion, language, etc. as organizing principles. Contrary to liberal misreadings, however, this is not the kind of populism emerging today in advanced industrial societies such as Western Europe. This new populism defies standard Left/Right political characterizations and strains to the limit existing bipolar political theories. This is why new



populist political formations such as the Lombard League in Northern Italy, which can be seen as a paradigmatic expression of this phenomenon, have been systematically misunderstood and generally dismissed as right-wing reactions to modernity. In fact, they warrant careful scrutiny precisely because, within new historical conditions, they articulate the same democratic spirit that gave rise to the original American Constitution and the Swiss Confederation, and provide a concrete alternative to a moribund liberalism.

### *The Unraveling of the Liberal Consensus*

Now that the Cold War is over, "liberal democracy" seems to have triumphed over its communist nemesis beyond its most optimistic expectations. To the extent that communist regimes collapsed internally rather than as a result of military defeats or other coercive means, the end of communism is even more definitive and clear-cut than the annihilation of fascism and Nazism by force of arms. While in the latter case the *external* imposition of the radical break with the past left the question of its *internalization* by the societies involved temporarily unresolved — pending other institutional and socio-psychological adjustments — in the case of communism the final blow was delivered by voluntary reforms such as *glasnost* and *perestroika* or, more precisely, their unintended consequences precipitating "velvet revolutions" and the failed Soviet *coup d'état*. From the viewpoint of liberal democracy, however, the victory may have been *too* thorough and thus ultimately Pyrrhic — to the point of threatening the system's very identity, since for the past four decades liberalism has been defined by its other: the bureaucratic collectivism of communist regimes.

Unlike the relatively satisfactory resolution of Hegel's dialectic of master and slave, where the vanquished is not annihilated but only subjugated in order to testify to his inferiority and thus provide the legitimating recognition the master needs to establish his very identity, the definitive obliteration of communism has plunged its declared nemesis, liberal democracy, into an unexpected identity crisis precisely when it should have been most secure. The American political system is now increasingly unable to articulate institutionally those collective values and aspirations whose heterogeneity had hitherto been conveniently fused into a national *group* (in the Sartrean sense) by the external mediation of the threatening communist other. That foreign "danger" has provided an overriding national purpose legitimating the growing shortcomings of an expanding state apparatus as the unavoidable emergency



cost of the post-WWII global confrontation with an expansionist "totalitarian" system — a confrontation which greatly facilitated the centralization of federal spending around a huge military budget, circumscribed internal political debates within an anti-communist consensus, and homogenized all values by means of a shallow consumerism. The restructuring of the old bipolar geopolitical context into three new power blocs no longer competing primarily for political and military dominance but merely for economic hegemony has reactivated conflicts which could be managed effectively within the existing political framework only as long as prevailing international emergency conditions remained relatively stable.

Having lost its totalizing other, the US liberal consensus of the Cold War years is now unravelling into a new version of pre-New Deal seriality and is thus confronted once again with those old internal conflicts (between labor and capital, freedom and equality, public and private) which it had managed to externalize for over forty years. They reappear transubstantiated as conflicts over fiscal reforms, civil rights and cultural autonomy. Contrary to the liberal establishment's self-congratulatory gloating and its technocratic flattening of history into a brave new world of unimpeded capitalist growth and successful social engineering, the end of communism has undermined the military Keynesianism which, since WWII, had artificially energized a tired corporate liberalism with smaller but equally lethal doses of the same centralist-bureaucratic narcotic whose debilitating side-effects were ultimately responsible for the demise of communist regimes: excessive centralization, compulsive homogenization, enforced conformity and arbitrary redistributive practices. Unable any longer to conceal within the Defense Department budget and Pentagon procurement practices the central planning it pretended to reject in principle, "liberal democracy" now has to deal with the re-politicization of previously technocratic decision-making processes and allocations which, for vague but widely accepted national security reasons, had been quietly removed from broad public scrutiny and turned into the administrative prerogatives of experts and professionals.

What complicates matters is that this repoliticization has had to take place under conditions of decreasing available resources. While the unexpected obsolescence of the arms race has rendered superfluous a great deal of military expenditures and encouraged countless would-be liberal reformers to recycle the Great Society delusions of an earlier generation, post-communist realities have turned out to be considerably



less rosy. Instead of freeing for other domestic uses substantial chunks of the defense budget, the decrease in justifiable military needs (reversed only temporarily because of the Gulf war) has depressed aggregate demand and undermined the political justification for massive budget deficits incurred in responding to the threat posed by various "red menaces," "missile gaps" or "evil empires." Consequently, the US government has had to consider decreasing *all* federal expenditures in the attempt to balance the budget (and even begin to consider reducing the national debt whose servicing absorbs growing percentages of the GNP). The result is a further reduction of aggregate demand and the plunging of the system into an economic recession no longer readily susceptible to traditional Keynesian therapy. Contrary to conventional liberal wisdom, what has invigorated the system for well over half a century was not a *temporary* and fiscally inconsequential "pump priming" but *permanent* deficit spending which is increasingly difficult to sustain and justify without severely mortgaging the future by overburdening and thus handicapping the economy.

Even if the problem of the growing deficit could be overlooked, continuing massive government deficit spending confronts new and probably insurmountable obstacles. The automatic answer to the obsolescence of military Keynesianism, i.e., to find something functionally equivalent, able to guarantee steady growth and a new totalizing national purpose (such as rebuilding the nation's infrastructure or undertaking ambitious programs of space exploration, ecological repair, etc.), is ruled out by two factors. First, it would be extremely difficult to build a national consensus around such massive projects without an overriding military threat. In this respect, the post-Cold War predicament resembles the one obtaining immediately before WWII, when the New Deal attempted to do something of the sort and ran into insurmountable political opposition. Massive totalizing projects of social reconstruction presuppose a prior national consensus which, with the exception of anti-fascism and anti-communism, either does not exist in the US or is impossible to construct under present conditions of sharply conflicting interests. What made military Keynesianism such an ideal solution was not so much its economic priming role but the fact that it legitimately suspended otherwise disruptive democratic decision-making practices and opened the gate to practically unaccountable government spending. Second, while in the 1940s it was possible to propose massive deficit spending as a *temporary* aberration to be rectified with the return to normal peacetime conditions of economic



stability, no such promise would be minimally credible today, after the experience of over half a century of accumulating a staggering national debt.

To the extent that the US has developed into an increasingly self-conscious heterogeneous society comprising a multitude of particularistic groups vindicating real or imagined value orientations, the unavoidable public debate concerning "the" national purpose necessary to totalize the polity behind any particular macroeconomic project is very likely to result in a stalemate impossible to resolve by standard liberal means within the existing institutional framework. Whereas from the 1920s to the 1960s the strategy of Americanization by means of the culture industry, universal education, etc. continued to homogenize a national constituency whose heterogeneity was simultaneously encouraged by the integration of previously excluded ethnic groups, it did so on the basis of questionable minimalist values such as consumerism and abstract individualism, which could be upheld only during periods of collective upward mobility and growing affluence.

The end of rapid growth in the 1990s brought about by the obsolescence of military Keynesianism, combined with the realization of the cultural devastation wrought by consumerism and Americanization, has contributed to a disenchantment with liberalism and the revitalization of the submerged but never entirely obliterated populist political tradition. What fuels this tradition is not only the significantly eroded yet still operative American ethos of self-sufficiency, autonomy and personal responsibility, which is anathema to any centralizing project presupposing standardization and homogenization. More importantly, it is also an expression of a growing impatience with the waste, inefficiency, counterproductivity and questionable rationality of an increasingly distant central government. When all is said and done, the US remains a society deeply distrustful of central authority not readily accountable to its legitimating constituency.

It is no accident that every instance of significant expansion of state capacities in the US — from war mobilization during WWI, the Great Depression, WWII, and the Cold War — has been (and could only be) in response to a crisis situation impossible to confront otherwise. Thus the end of the Cold War and the relative stabilization of international relations under the stewardship of three major power blocs inextricably connected by cultural and economic ties prematurely draws the curtain on the 20th century — a century characterized by a crisis-driven centralization causing considerable intended and unintended social disintegration.



As Christopher Lasch has shown, the corollary of this process of practically uninterrupted centralization from WWI on has been liberalism's turn into an elitist and managerial ideology.<sup>1</sup> Independently of the recent demise of military Keynesianism, over the last thirty years growing opposition to this kind of liberalism had already triggered considerable resentment resulting in the resurgence of a populism that had exploded on the American scene in the late 19th century.<sup>2</sup> Its demise at that time was not, as Lawrence Goodwyn emphasizes, entirely a function of political contingencies such as poor choices culminating in its fusion with the Democratic Party in 1896. Nor was it primarily due to the return of economic prosperity, as Richard Hofstadter deduces from his reading of the movement as a relatively irrelevant pressure-group-turned-into-a-political-party clumsily articulating a rural version of "entrepreneurial radicalism."<sup>3</sup> In the long run the fate of populism, broadly understood as a particular expression of the American democratic project, was sealed by the Progressive movement and its legacy. By advocating increased state regulation of the economy, Progressivism and the New Deal managed to fulfill the *letter* of populist demands for state protection of their economic interests threatened by unscrupulous banking practices, tight money policies and growing industrial exploitation, but not their democratic *spirit*. This helps explain why populism resurfaced in the early 1960s, with the beginning of the crisis of the welfare state. At that point it became increasingly obvious that state regulation of the economy had more to do with guaranteeing the profitability of capital and providing remunerative employment opportunities for New Class technocrats than with safeguarding populist interests now expanded well beyond Southern and Western farmers to include most of the middle classes.

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1. Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), esp. Ch. 10, "The Politics of the Civilized Minority," pp. 412-532.

2. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York: Oxford, 1976). The publication of this work marked the beginning of a re-evaluation of American populism and reversed standard liberal interpretations of the movement fabricated by liberal historians during the 1950s as tendentially reactionary, racist and anti-intellectual. The many studies that have appeared since that time only expand and extend its analysis, without necessitating any substantial alteration of the main thesis. For a standard liberal misreading of populism, see Peter Wiles, "A Syndrome, not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism," in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), pp. 166-179.

3. Richard Hofstadter, "North America," in Ionescu and Gellner eds., *Populism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-27. While widely regarded as the standard account during the 1950s and 1960s, Hofstadter's work has not withstood critical scrutiny. Cf. Lasch, *op. cit.*, pp. 217-225.



This opposition is not simply the expression of a shifting and generally fickle national mood but is related to the institutional involution of the welfare state — the natural outcome of liberal regimes. Although liberalism has been defined in a number of different ways, its overprivileging of individualism — possessive, abstract or otherwise — necessitates the deployment of an increasingly powerful state, independently of whatever particular crises may have historically precipitated the actual centralization of power. Thus liberalism is terminally statist. Since the individual cannot be the source of a morality it already presupposes, and as inherited social norms are systematically eroded by the instrumental rationality of a modernity unable to legitimate anything not immediately redeemable at the marketplace of operational ideas, liberals have had to resort more and more to the state as the agency entrusted with externally containing an indeterminate collective behavior no longer internally regulated by traditional moral codes. But in the long run state intervention only compounds the problem by extending and generalizing instrumental rationality, thus undermining the preconditions for its own continued intervention. It erodes that individuality presupposed as a precondition for the functioning of the system and gradually engenders a state-dependent personality increasingly unable to function without the administration and guidance of managerial agencies. No longer resisted and therefore no longer closely monitored by a weakened individualism and autonomous social institutions, these agencies become themselves increasingly unaccountable to any external bodies and thus vulnerable to corruption, waste and counterproductivity.<sup>4</sup>

### *Sociology to the Rescue*

Liberal thinkers have recognized these destructive dynamics and sought solutions either through further rationalization of the particular communities or through an ethical regrouping of the welfare state. However, to the extent that their analyses remain within liberal New Class ideological assumptions the solutions they propose are either predicated on wishful thinking or end up perpetuating and intensifying existing social pathologies. Thus, in the case of Jürgen Habermas, probably the best known European liberal with a large American following, his commitment to a communicative version of the liberal

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4. For an earlier analysis of this crisis and of the changes in administrative strategies to counter bureaucratic involution by integrating new forms of internal opposition, see Paul Piccone, "The Crisis of One-Dimensionality," in *Telos* 35 (Spring 1978), pp. 44-54.



theory of infinite progress (predicated on the inevitability of the growth of knowledge) leads him to hypostatize the present crisis-ridden welfare state as an irreversible historical achievement. One solution to the crisis is to devise strategies to defuse the growing unease with liberalism by reintegrating unfulfilled populist aspirations into what he can only interpret as a temporary legitimation crisis precipitated by bureaucratic excesses and democratic deficits.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike most other liberal thinkers who dismiss the populist emphasis on existing community norms and local autonomy as a reactionary defense of pre-modern superstition and dogma, Habermas readily acknowledges the centrality of this populist dimension and locates it as

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5. The crisis of liberal democracy presupposes, as part of its ideological self-misunderstanding, a liberal theory no longer able to confront its own crisis other than by proposing as solutions what otherwise turn out to be the problems. Thus a couple of decades ago Habermas, whose communication theory is but a linguistification of Weberian sociology, simply extended the liberal prognosis in analyzing what he saw as a growing legitimation crisis in Western societies in terms of the collapse of the historical compromise between labor and capital. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975). According to this compromise, labor forfeited decision-making options to a technostucture entrusted with retaining unchanged existing relations of domination, in exchange for relatively high wages, affluence and an abundance of consumer goods. For Habermas this compromise collapsed when this technostucture became overcentralized and insulated from the essential feed-back mechanisms provided by the constituency it was to serve. As a result, it eroded the conditions necessary for its smooth functioning by engendering an economic crisis (*qua* ecological crisis of physical limits to growth), a rationality crisis (*qua* destruction of regulatory feed-back mechanisms) and a motivation crisis (*qua* the undermining of individualism and the development of what has come to be known as the state-dependent personality). Thus the legitimation crisis was the result of these other three crises and could only be resolved through a redemocratization of politics which, by providing solutions to the other three crises, would also relegate "liberal democratic" systems. The assumption throughout was that the emancipatory character of undistorted communication would necessarily generate a rational consensus translatable into the rational administrative structure of the welfare state. Predicated on questionable enthymematic Marxist premises assuming the axiological uniformity of a "labor" tendentially constituting the universal class, this analysis may have made sense in a society such as Germany where the relatively high homogeneity of the population meant that there were shared traditions and customs translatable into a new liberal consensus for particular programs of social reconstruction — such as the SPD's *Modell Deutschland* successfully deployed in the late 1970s to displace Ludwig Erhard's post-war technocratic strategy. It made no sense in the US, however, where cultural heterogeneity ruled out any smooth deployment of such a strategy. Over a decade after writing *Legitimation Crisis*, and after discovering Husserl's concept of the *Lebenswelt* (which Habermas redefined in terms of communication theory), his analysis became more sophisticated without, however, losing its apologetic liberal character. The objective remains to relegate the welfare state by first rationalizing the polity through the blessings of undistorted discursive practices — another case of Bertolt Brecht's state officials electing new voters to replace the existing ones they do not like.



a murky "third area," beneath the state and the equivalent of what his more careless American epigones have redefined as "civil society" — an inherently ambiguous term he is wise enough not to use. He also acknowledges that, to the extent it expresses heterogeneous grass-roots concerns, this grass-roots populist dimension cannot be reduced to one homogeneous camp. Thus, after his bruising confrontation with post-modernity, he no longer talks about any one-dimensional discursive domain but about a plurality of "public spheres" to take into account the particularity of the various heterogeneous communities. This pluralism, however, is only a tactical concession since in politically constituting their demands all these public spheres must ultimately articulate discursively their processes of collective will-formation and become caught in the universalism he assumes to be presupposed by undistorted communicative practices. These practices will permeate any consciousness — populist or otherwise — which, in order to have political impact, cannot remain spontaneous and inarticulate. Effective resistance to what Habermas mystifies as "the colonization of the lifeworld" is possible only if the various communities undergo a thorough "communicative" rationalization which eventually will level them out and make them conform with the pseudo-universalist tenets of predominant New Class ideology, i.e., the homogenization of precisely that particularity populists seek to defend. Habermas' vindication of the primacy of the lifeworld or of populist instances is at the same time a strategy of instrumentalization since it requires an exhaustive translation of populist traditions and customs into communicatively articulated norms. As such communication theory ends up as the functional equivalent of the culture industry, universal education and other older leveling institutions in rationalizing and making more responsive a liberal democracy which has lost contact with its legitimating foundations. The point throughout is to defend the welfare state against neo-conservative attacks.<sup>6</sup>

Habermas' solution essentially consists in having the various constituencies homogenize spontaneously rather than by forcing pseudo-universalist New Class ideology on them. Unfortunately, his demand that all features of the populist lifeworld be discursively articulated not only threatens to destroy it even more effectively than standard bureaucratic

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6. See Jürgen Habermas, "The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies," in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*, ed. and trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 58-69.



strategies of colonization but also provides no guarantees that the end product will be anything close to the ideal speech communities he envisions. It is an act of unwarranted modernist faith to assume that the spontaneous rationalization of the lifeworld will automatically universalize the ideal speech situation. Short of constituting a communicative brave new world where everyone will speak impeccably a mythical language able to exhaustively and unambiguously apprehend reality, cultural heterogeneity is here to stay — not as a mark of imperfection, but as an ineradicable condition of Being. This elaborate exercise in translating into communication theory standard welfare state practices of mediatizing constituencies into “spontaneously” sponsoring otherwise extraneous technocratic policies misses the real point. In heterogeneous societies liberalism cannot sustain a highly centralized state without at the same time bureaucratically homogenizing and thereby destroying the autonomy of the various constituencies — a precondition for the system’s rationality and democratic legitimacy — nor can it guarantee the particularity and autonomy of these constituencies while remaining centralized. In order to remain centralized it must trivialize the axiological dimension and reduce it to minimal values such as consumerism and affluence — values acceptable to a broad range of constituencies. At any rate such a strategy remains viable only under conditions of steady economic growth during which all other problems are assumed to be resolvable by means of the new affluence.

Other liberals are not seduced as readily as Habermas by the sirens of communication theory and the promise that, if everyone were to talk openly to everyone else, all disagreements would evaporate and the system would be successfully prevented from colonizing spontaneously self-rationalizing lifeworlds. Unconvinced by the emancipatory virtues of undistorted discursive practices, sociologists such as Alan Wolfe recognize the central constitutive role of values in society and focus directly on the radical regrounding of fundamental values. Thus they readily grant that “a liberal theory of politics was linked to a conservative theory of society”<sup>7</sup> and they also grudgingly acknowledge that liberal institutions relying exclusively on market and state as steering mechanisms tend to erode these traditional preconditions.<sup>8</sup> Unwilling to grant the legitimacy of these traditional residues whose erosion has precipitated contemporary social disintegration — Habermas’ lifeworld or the

7. Alan Wolfe, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 108.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 246.



populists' traditions and customs, they call for the deployment of sociology as a moral guide to reconstitute a "civil society" presently in ruins and to substitute a new moral vision for traditional or "conservative" cultural underpinnings.<sup>9</sup>

But morality is not a matter of abstract deliberation by committees of professional sociologists, no matter how eminently qualified they may be. It has to do with the most fundamental determinants of personal and social identity. Thus it can never be amenable to "the construction of moral rules as a sociological practice" as Wolfe claims, since people are always already rooted in living traditions that constitute them as moral agents.<sup>10</sup> The point is to *modify* and reconstitute existing practices rather than to pontificate abstractly about sociological experts "helping people make their own rules." A truly democratic solution unshackled by the elitist encroachment of state agencies of sociological rationalization would be to *protect* existing communities within a strong federal context in which their axiological codes are not superseded by external and allegedly transcendental alternatives or forcibly penetrated and colonized by any "emancipatory" agencies whose ethical superiority can only be predicated on some other implicit code. To the extent that the current crisis of liberalism has to do with its inability to provide totalizing norms sufficiently strong and universally binding to anchor a viable project of social reconstruction, Wolfe's sociological approach to moral obligation is unlikely to do anything different from what sociology has always done.<sup>11</sup> Instead of mediating the reconstitution of the components of Wolfe's "civil society" with the help of

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

10. Habermas also rejects the possibility of grounding morality in the subject — something for which Wolfe reprimands him. However, Habermas' alternative in his *Diskursethik*, i.e., to ground it in *linguistic* intersubjectivity, is hardly an improvement over Wolfe (*ibid.*, p. 233). To be sure, Wolfe does not want sociologists to condescendingly set people straight as to the nature of their moral obligations. In fact, he explicitly claims that the "distinctive contribution of a sociological approach to morality . . . is not to tell people what they ought to do in situations of moral complexity, but rather to help individuals discover and apply for themselves the moral rules they already, as social beings, possess" (*ibid.*, p. 211). But if such is the case, it is unclear why people need sociologists in such a task rather than, e.g., rabbis, bartenders or psychotherapists.

11. Wolfe's efforts to descientize sociology is tantamount to throwing in the towel after over a century of systematic efforts to develop the discipline as a "social science." It would self-consciously turn sociology into what it was immediately after the Civil War, before it sought to become a science. Cf. Stephen Park Turner and Jonathan H. Turner, *The Impossible Science: An Institutional Analysis of American Sociology* (New York: Sage Publications, 1990), pp. 11ff. This honest concession by Wolfe, however, should also acknowledge the failure of the project that the scientization of sociology was meant to fulfill, i.e., to legitimate as universally valid the moral tenets of secularized Protestantism;



scientific mystifications these traditional remnants neither need nor want, sociology can only inform and advise the only social institution that could have been receptive to its results: the administrative apparatus. Already by the 1950s, however, the R & D arm of this apparatus had become aware of the unreliability of social scientific knowledge and of the counterproductivity of most social engineering.<sup>12</sup>

While Wolfe's moral exhortations are predicated on liberalism's traditional assumption of abstract individuality, his vindication of a viable social role for sociologists appears much more like a self-serving attempt to reground a discipline confronting the loss of its real object with the decline of the welfare state. Possible populist objections to sociology follow Popperian lines. Since society has to do with people and their freedom, any *unrequested* intervention by sociologists or other agencies can only be an unwarranted intrusion. Sociology cannot be a social "science" having people as its objects because people are not passive objects but tendentially free subjects. Its real presupposed object, the welfare state, whose delegitimation threatens to leave sociology an academic orphan, cannot be recognized because that would reveal sociology to be what it has always been — a technology of domination — and thus undermine its moral exhortations as vacuous and manipulative strategies. Wolfe seems to have somehow realized as much. So he digs out of the 19th century the ambiguous concept of "civil society" as a new object to guarantee sociology a place in standard university catalogues: whereas political science studies the state and economics studies the market, sociology studies civil society. By implicitly defining civil society in the way sociologists have historically defined *communities*, he poses their reconstitution and nurturing as the task of sociology. Since, however, this definition of communities actually

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and thus caution against the desirability of developing and imposing an hegemonic moral code in an increasingly heterogeneous society. The history of "sovietization" and of the American welfare state are the most vivid testimony of recent failures of such a project.

12. Contrary to Wolfe's efforts to recycle sociology as the moral philosophy of "civil society" as a counterweight to political science's and economics' encroachment into its alleged domain by universalizing the state and the market, the Turners show that the present demise of sociology is a result of the diversification of the field in response to shifting student interests and the failure to develop a social science from the 1920s to the 1950s. Originally sponsored by the likes of the Rockefeller and Ford foundations as the scientization of Protestantism and, as such, as the universally valid basis of government policy, sociology's true calling as the intellectual arm of the bureaucratic apparatus was subverted by the spontaneous rise of critical sociology and the resulting internal disintegration of sociology as a discipline. Cf. Turner and Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-196; and Arthur J. Vidich and Stanford M. Lyman, *American Sociology: Worldly Rejections of Religion and Their Directions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).



rules out sociological intervention, he readily substitutes "society" — civil or otherwise — whose formal character and present disintegrated predicament practically calls for a sociological intervention (something Wolfe seeks to legitimate by covertly appealing to traditional community values of *caritas*, compassion, care for others or, more generally, "moral obligation"). This conceptual fraud allows Wolfe to salvage an appropriate object of study for sociologists: moral philosophy. Their role, therefore, is another form of rationalization of "civil society." According to Wolfe, the sociologist should do for liberalism — only better — what Habermas' communication theory proposed: axiologically homogenize the polity and relegitimate the welfare state as the expression of its collective ethical will.

Since the late 19th century it has been generally assumed by most sociologists that the organicity provided by *communities*, what constituted personal identities, was lost with its displacement by formal social relations typical of *bourgeois society* (after Marx, the standard translation of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, now mystified as "civil society" and rediscovered by Wolfe in the Scottish Enlightenment). Since liberalism was the political horizon within which sociology thrived, from Weber and Parsons to Lipset and Bell all serious sociologists have sought to accomplish a *stabilization* rather than a *reversal* of this modern predicament. Caught within an updated version of the one-way liberal theory of history whereby progress unfolds from pre-modernity to modernity (and, more recently, to post-modernity), hardly any sociologist worth the name ever considered the reconstitution of communities. It is to Wolfe's credit that he not only recognizes the desirability of reconstituting communities by emphasizing "moral obligation," but actually poses it as a project for sociology as a discipline. Such a project, however, cannot be realized by sociology as he systematically misunderstands its domain and, consequently, the sociologist's role. His "realms of intimacy, trust, caring, and autonomy that *are* different from the larger world of politics and economics"<sup>13</sup> do not describe *societies* but *communities*. These realms are much closer to Habermas' lifeworld and to classical populist notions of communities<sup>14</sup> than to the standard notion

13. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

14. Unfortunately, Wolfe subscribes to a condescending notion of populism as "identification with the moral purity of the oppressed" (*ibid.*, p. 234). In so doing, he falls squarely in line with standard liberal misinterpretations of populism as a quasi-religious, irrational and, at any rate, hopelessly simplistic *Weltanschauung*. For a critique of Wolfe's earlier efforts to repackage and sell sociology as a discipline, see Moishe Gonzales, "Commentary on *Tikkun*," in *Telos* 69 (Fall 1986), pp. 134-135.



of "society" before it became souped up by the qualifier "civil": an "arena in which a multitude of anonymous groups and collective agents influence one another, form coalitions, control access to the means of production and communication, and, already less visibly, preestablish through their social power the margins within which political questions can be thematized and decided."<sup>15</sup> Unlike societies, communities cannot be permanently rationalized by coercion: lasting rationalization requires a process of gradual internalization. By confusing the two Wolfe can deploy the sociologist as the equivalent of Hegel's "external mediator" to reconcile the heterogeneity of conflicting private interests, power struggles etc. — the classical role of the bureaucrat. But whereas Hegel's bureaucrat is neutral, Wolfe's sociologist cannot resist helping reconstitute community (a.k.a. "civil society"). Thus his scholarly bureaucrat tends to take on the role of the Jacobin or the Bolshevik as he realizes that what Wolfe calls "the gift of society" is being wasted. The rest is history! As much as one might sympathize with people confronted with unemployment or, if they already have tenure, with intellectual marginalization, community-reconstitution is too important a project to be staked out as a special reserve for otherwise academically displaced sociologists.

Sociologists professionally have no options other than to gravitate from communities (in which they cannot have any privileged role other than as integral members) to the state (where they can function as scientific experts). Since the state comes to occupy such a central role, they can best function in a society increasingly bifurcated into a managerial elite and disempowered masses, with a gray area in between occupied by residual "individuals" constituted as such by communities not yet completely eroded. Thus today the role of sociology is terminally restorational: in a context characterized by the natural disintegration of the welfare state, sociology seeks to relegitimate and rationalize it. At best sociology can aspire to be what it has always sought to become: the research arm of the bureaucratic apparatus. This feeds into the dynamics of the crisis of liberalism where an increasingly unmanageable government systematically disempowers its alienated citizens into passive wards of the state, unable or unwilling to function as citizens and in need of more and more supervision and guidance by sociologists and other "experts." But this is a losing proposition. Since disempowerment and alienation breed normlessness, social order can be

15. Habermas, *op. cit.*, p. 66.



maintained only by increasing legislation to substitute for disintegrating internalized norms, which generates a vicious circle by engendering more alienation, and so on. Within this legalistic structuring of politics by late liberalism, most people find it increasingly impossible to participate, leaving them with civil disobedience as their only option to defend whatever values they feel threatened by the system or to articulate politically their particular interests uninterpreted and free of bureaucratic redescriptions.<sup>16</sup>

This crisis of technocratic liberal democracy manifests itself first and foremost as a crisis of ungovernability, whose most obvious symptoms are inefficiency, corruption and counterproductivity. It is not a particular problem with this or that government but an inherent feature of all representative institutions unable to establish strong feedback mechanisms guaranteeing accountability and, within a democratic context, legitimacy. Populism comes about as a response to this modern predicament: the result of the realization of an unbridgeable gap between real needs and official policies, lived informal norms and an increasingly remote formal rationality. It is not an accident that in popular speech "Washington" and "bureaucrat" have come to take on derogatory connotations.

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16. This is the process Carl Schmitt described as that "motorized legislation" brought about by legal positivism's attempt to externalize and codify all previously internalized norms. It is part of that process Adorno and Horkheimer described as the dialectic of enlightenment, where the domination of the concept inexorably leads to the reversion of enlightenment into myth, i.e., the hypostatization of particular mythological values above all else. In Schmitt's formulation it became the cancer of the modern age and brought about the eventual instrumentalization and delegitimation of law into mere legality, the increasing deployment of super-legality understood precisely as the hypostatization of particular values above the law, and the inevitable disintegration of liberal democratic regimes — a disintegration already prefigured by the withering of the Soviet state. For a discussion of these concepts, see Carl Schmitt, "The Plight of European Jurisprudence," in *Telos* 83 (Spring 1990), pp. 35-70.; G. L. Ulmen, *Politischer Mehrwert: Eine Studie über Max Weber und Carl Schmitt* (Weinheim: Acta humaniora, 1991), pp. 69-86 and 408-448; and Michele Nicoletti, *Trascendenza e Potere: La Teologia Politica di Carl Schmitt* (Brescia: Marcelliana, 1990), pp. 353ff. Even Habermas acknowledges that this bureaucratic *modus operandi* of the welfare state disintegrates social life (*op. cit.*, pp. 58-59). However, his solution, i.e., "the establishment of new forms of life," presupposes the existence of that "undamaged subjectivity" he has finally acknowledged to be a counterfactual pipe dream (*ibid.*, p. 69). Either communities rationalize themselves according to their own logic, or it does not happen. Their particularities must be allowed to unfold according to their own dynamics, in relation with other competing communities. These particularities are ultimately totalized within a broad teleological project, but not through communication or language, and certainly not by sociologists. See Paul Piccone and G. L. Ulmen, "Schmitt's 'Testament' and the Future of Europe," in *Telos* 83 (Spring 1990), pp. 3-34.



### *The Rise of the New Populism*

Historically populist movements have arisen in response to a variety of different crises. 19th century agrarian populism in the American South was triggered by the Draconian deflationary fiscal policies instituted after the Civil War and their devastating consequences on farmers. In Russia, by contrast, populism sought a return to ethnic, religious and local traditions as the bases of a new order to avoid the tribulations of Western capitalist development.<sup>17</sup> As Lasch, Goodwyn and other historians of populism have emphasized, the recent resurgence of the phenomenon is a result of a growing dissatisfaction with the ideology of progress and unlimited economic development advocated both by liberal-democratic and bureaucratic-collectivist regimes. From the beginning of the century this transformation has taken place as the unintended consequence of the project of turning the American *federation* into a *nation* and has led to the deployment of a strategy of "Americanization." Today it is becoming increasingly obvious that the project did, on the whole, succeed, but only by replacing deeply-rooted traditions and customs with a narcissistic individualism and a shallow consumerism.

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17. Even more than American populism, its Russian counterpart has been the victim of considerable historical distortion, beginning with Engels himself, during the period after Marx' death, when he began to codify historical materialism into the "orthodox Marxism" of the Second International that eventually became frozen into the dogma of Marxism-Leninism. See Franco Venturi, *Studies in Free Russia*, trans. by Fausta Segre Alsby and Margaret O'Dell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 238-240. Thereafter Lenin and all subsequent communist historiography simply dismissed Russian populism as a backward-looking petty bourgeois aberration in the 19th century, dumped into the infamous dustbin of history once Leninism, the one and only true revolutionary theory and practice, came on the scene. In spite of dissenting interpretations by scholars such as Franco Venturi, Isaiah Berlin, Richard Pipes and others, this dogmatic interpretation remained predominant well into the early 1970s, when Polish *apparatchiki* such as Andrzej Walicki, elaborating Lenin's sacred texts, would still insist that populism was not even a *movement* but only the *ideology* of a sector of the Russian intelligentsia having little to do with real popular aspirations. See his "Russia," in Ionescu and Gellner, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91. This article is a shorter version of his equally questionable book *The Controversy over Capitalism. Studies in the Social Philosophy of the Russian Populists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). It is noteworthy that some of the pages of Isaiah Berlin's introduction to the standard text on the subject [Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution. A History of the Populist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia* (London:Weinfeld and Nicholson, 1960)] could have come directly out of the best accounts of American populism by Lasch, Goodwyn or Norman Pollock (cf. his *The Just Polity: Populism, Law and Human Welfare* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988]). For a summary comparison of Russian and American populism, see Gianna Pomata, "A Common Heritage: The Historical Memory of Populism in Europe and the United States," in Harry C. Boyte and Frank Riessman, eds., *The New Populism: The Politics of Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), pp. 30-50.



To the extent that this project of Americanization was primarily a statist strategy only indirectly related to popular needs and aspirations, it did not succeed in generating an ethical vision sufficiently rich and widespread to sustain a *nation* and constitute a rough aggregation of particular groups — the US in the 19th century — into a broader *community*. The new values that did become generalized were those associated with consumerism, which fed smoothly into the logic of capitalist rationalization. Whatever heterogeneous traditions and customs turned out to be dysfunctional to the new order were readily branded pre-modern, irrational and ultimately a mark of obsolescence and backwardness. The result was the kind of community disintegration documented by the Lynds in their classic work, *Middletown*. The current resurgence of populism has to do with the growing realization of the magnitude of these losses and of the impossibility and/or undesirability of the infinite growth promised by liberalism — promises which do not seem fulfillable within existing economic dynamics and which, at any rate, increasingly threaten to precipitate massive ecological catastrophes.

Although otherwise incommensurable with the barbaric means deployed by bureaucratic-centralist regimes, especially during the Stalinist era, the Americanization strategy and its consequences are not structurally different from parallel processes in the former USSR.<sup>18</sup> Thus it is not surprising that over the last three decades there has been an increasing resentment of counterproductive government intervention in housing, employment, education and other matters to fulfill homogenizing social agenda extraneous to the needs and aspirations of the communities directly effected. Instead of remedying significantly the manifest injustices against which they were deployed on the basis of an abstract state-sanctioned egalitarianism, these policies have generally contributed to a further deterioration and disintegration of struggling communities. Predicated on economic growth (benefiting mostly the wealthy) and of redistribution (benefiting primarily the underclass), these policies leave the bulk of the middle class, which bears the brunt of their consequences, overburdened, disenfranchised and resentful.<sup>19</sup> It is a process not altogether different from the Bolshevik

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18. It is not a coincidence that, in analyzing the causes of disintegration in the former USSR and the former Yugoslavia, Veljko Vujacic and Victor Zaslavsky point to the very same social dynamics at work in the US. See "The Causes of Disintegration in the USSR and Yugoslavia," in *Telos* 88 (Summer 1991), pp. 120-140.

19. Lasch has carefully reconstructed how liberal attacks on middle class values and institutions in the US has triggered the recent resurgence of populism — especially its New Right variety. Cf. Lasch, *op. cit.*, pp. 476ff.



elite's mobilization of "workers and poor peasants" to annihilate the aristocracy, the "kulaks" and whatever there was of a nascent middle class in Russia. The result was not only the destruction of agriculture, but also the undermining of all creativity and initiative without which the USSR ended up as one of the world's most conservative and unimaginative societies.

The new populism demands government accountability, institutional reorganization and a redefinition of politics to facilitate participation beyond the limited levels presently available within representative democracy.<sup>20</sup> Yet populism remains a confused notion and, partly as a result, one of the most misunderstood and distorted phenomena in modern politics.<sup>21</sup> While the liberal mass media persists in disparagingly labeling "populist" anything expressing popular sentiments *unmediatized* by certified elites, and middle-brow academics insist on misperceiving this resurgence of populism as short-sighted, right-wing, anti-intellectual and xenophobic — precisely in the way the phenomenon has been historically distorted and eventually codified by leading 1950s liberal ideologues<sup>22</sup> — recent scholarship has exploded most of these myths

20. That this is neither a particularly novel development nor one limited to the US can be seen in the first line of Ionescu and Gellner, *Populism*, *op. cit.*, where they modify the opening phrase of *The Communist Manifesto* to read that: "A spectre is haunting the world — populism."

21. After attempting to review and classify most of the available literature with the help of Wittgensteinian mystifications such as "family resemblances" and "cluster concepts" in order to develop a satisfactory social-scientific definition of "populism," this is roughly what Margaret Canovan concludes, while wishing that the concept had never been developed in the first place. See her *Populism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Janovich, 1981), p. 301. For a radically different account, see Lawrence Goodwyn, "Rethinking 'Populism': Paradoxes of Historiography and Democracy," in *Telos* 88 (Summer 1991), pp. 37-56.

22. Although such crudely ideological accounts of populism are still predominant in the US (cf. the front page of *The New Republic* of November 25, 1991 with the heading "The New Populism" directly above a picture of David Duke, meant to associate populism with racism) they are rapidly disappearing from serious scholarship. Abroad, however, the situation remains nothing short of disgraceful — even in otherwise respectable academic publications. Thus, a special "dossier" in the French journal *Cosmopolitiques*, No. 18 (February 1991) devoted to the theme "Populisme: Le Mal Européen?" exhibits not only an appalling ignorance of the voluminous literature on the subject (none of it is mentioned), but displays in the process most of the self-contradictory features of late 20th century liberalism. Thus, while grudgingly acknowledging that democracy is "the government of the people," Georges Ayache immediately adds the qualification that this means *representative* democracy since the people's immediate instincts are not to be trusted and, after all, only "competent representatives" can guarantee "freedom, well-being and integrity" (*ibid.* p. 7). Although in an interview (appropriately titled "Le populisme ou le refus de la complexité du monde," p. 50)



and begun to re-examine the relevant documents and events to draw rather different conclusions. In the wake of Goodwyn's reexamination of the history of 19th century agrarian populism, it is becoming widely acknowledged that the phenomenon — as ambiguous and inarticulate as it usually appears — must be reinterpreted as an essential moment in the unsuccessful attempt to realize what he calls "the democratic promise" against the elitism of a triumphant corporate liberalism.<sup>23</sup>

Contrary to both liberal and conservative conventional wisdom, today's growing interest in populism in the US has very little to do with any backlash against the civil rights movement; a resurgence of traditional prejudices, racist resentment of welfare and other redistributive policies or simply with poor leadership. Rather, as Harry C. Boyte *et al* argue,<sup>24</sup> it has a great deal to do with the grass-roots rejection of the technocratic state developed by the New Deal and institutionalized with the subsequent war mobilization — a rejection which received its first political articulation when this technocratic state began to run into a crisis in the early 1960s<sup>25</sup> and whose most visible expressions were not

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Thierry de Beaucé admits that populism may have to do with "crises of political representation," he insists on branding populists "the declared enemies of representative democracy," notwithstanding the fact that populism has historically sought to remedy precisely these "representational deficits" with *participatory* democracy. At any rate, the whole operation is meant to identify *tout court* populism with Le Pen's National Front, demagoguery, know-nothingism, nostalgic longing for long-gone communities (p. 16), standard anti-intellectualism (p. 22), and the "reduction of the complexity of social life to some of its extremely schematic features" (pp. 24 and 43). While condemning populism as unequivocally "reactionary," the whole dossier turns out to be a tired apology for existing political institutions by calling for a "deepening of our democracy" and envisioning "renewed forms of citizenship (pp. 52-53) — precisely what populists have historically sought. In the entire dossier there is no mention of American populism and the couple of short simplistic articles on Russian and East European populism are concerned almost exclusively with anti-Semitism. For a careful reconstruction of populism's political philosophy — although focused only on early American populism — see Norman Pollack, *op. cit.* The growing literature on the subject is so extensive that it is impossible to cite. For a partial list see Boyte and Riesman, *op. cit.*, pp. 319ff.

23. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, *op. cit.*, pp. 542ff. Although he analyzes Kansas populism in dubious class terms, Scott G. McNall comes to roughly similar conclusions in his *The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

24. Harry C. Boyte, Heather Booth and Steve Max, *Citizen Action and the New American Populism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986). Cf. also Harry C. Boyte, *Common Wealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1989). While rich in raw information, Boyte's account is theoretically sloppy, superficial and self-contradictory. Whenever his analysis runs into conceptual problems the narrative fades into the anecdotal mode. As such, it readily feeds into the popular stereotype of populism as a useless theoretical mishmash.

25. Cf. E. J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), pp. Chs. 1 and 2.



only the rise of the New Left but also Barry Goldwater's campaign in 1964, followed by George Wallace's American Independent Party in 1968, Jimmy Carter's 1976 defeat of the Democratic Party's liberal establishment, up to Ronald Reagan's "revolution" in the 1980s. It presupposes what European political scientists call "transversal politics," which transcend the standard Left/Right division to vindicate local autonomy, traditions and customs against bureaucratic encroachments by external exploiting agencies.

Unfortunately, old mental habits are difficult to shake and populists with New Left backgrounds tend to remain mired in traditional political dogma contraposing the "reactionary" populism of the New Right to their own, new and improved "progressive" brand. In so doing, however, they destroy the originality of populism understood as the vindication of people's *really existing* cultures, traditions and customs. The privileging of "progressive" populism allows them to project onto populism, and thus substitute for it, a Left-liberal Enlightenment ideology, thus perpetuating precisely that same substitutionist elitism Lasch attacks as one of the fundamental flaws of 20th century liberalism.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, their "progressive" populism turns out to be a warmed-over version of codified 1960s New Left ideology (understood not in its early form, as a vindication of participatory democracy, tolerance and axiological heterogeneity, but in its late corrupted version as merely a self-righteous call to make the existing system, arbitrarily redefined according to liberal values, live up to its promises by whatever means necessary).<sup>27</sup> The only possible outcome is another call for the rationalization of existing pathological

26 For particular examples of how this substitutionist strategy works, see Russell A. Berman, "Popular Culture and Populist Culture," in *Telos* 87 (Spring 1991), pp. 59-70; and "Intellectuals and the Gulf War in Germany and in the United States," in *Telos* 88 (Summer 1991), pp. 167-180.

27. Typical of this simplistic approach is the anthology edited by Boyte and Riessman, *The New Populism*, *op. cit.*, which opens with an essay by Goodwyn criticizing the ideology of progress as foreign to populism. Every other essay in the volume, however, proceeds to vindicate "good" progressive populism against "bad" conservative falsifications. Boyte himself acknowledges in the Introduction that populism poses a challenge to both Left and Right, but immediately proceeds along with most of his contributors to associate populism *tout court* with late New Left ideology. The book's "political correctness" is further demonstrated by vacuous discussions of "feminist," "disabled," "minority," etc. versions of populism. That populism aims, first and foremost, at the revitalization and reconstitution of communitarian traditions and customs where such bureaucratic designations make no sense and whose deployment constitute what in Habermasian language amount to strategies to colonize the lifeworld (since communities' internal divisions are not a function of abstract universal determinations but of internalized traditional norms) is readily forgotten in a scatterbrained celebration of populism as "a night in which all cows are black."



power relations: rendering government more "responsive" and "accountable," without ultimately challenging the structural conditions (technocracy, bureaucracy, professionalism, centralization, axiological pseudo-universalism, etc.) responsible for the social disintegration and the crisis of liberalism.

Unlike its 19th century forerunner, the new populism can no longer pretend to vindicate the interests and lifestyles of a relatively homogeneous "people." Although the US was always an heterogeneous society, in the 19th century, when much of the country was not yet altogether sold on the idea of racial equality and native populations were still being regularly exterminated or confined to remote reservations, WASP hegemony had not yet been challenged in any significant way and marginal groups could not question — and often did not really want to question but rather internalize — the predominant value system. The result was the functional equivalent of a relatively homogeneous constituency. In this sense the populists were not entirely out of line in defending what in retrospect look suspiciously like highly exclusionary nativist positions. This helps explain the not always ungrounded charges of ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, racism, anti-Catholicism and general xenophobia hurled against populism. Today the new populism must not forget that what is crucial in *e pluribus unum* is that *pluribus* without which the *unum* will have problems remaining such.

It is this predicament that forces the new populism to reconsider the original notion of federalism as an integral part of any program seeking to transcend the antinomies of liberalism and vindicate participatory democracy as necessary for the reconstitution of organic communities. Without that type of federalism all appeals to populist sentiments are doomed to retrace the liberal path to managerialism, depoliticization of public discussion, and the spectacularization of politics. To the extent that all national constituencies are heterogeneous and divided on various issues, any attempt to develop a meaningful national policy will either end up clashing with a substantial segment of this constituency or, in order to appease everyone, whatever national policy is ultimately proposed will have to be so vague and ambiguous as to be politically meaningless. What has to be circumvented is the traditionally megalomaniacal nation-state which, because of its sheer size, rules out the possibility of participatory democracy and the constitution of a new collective consciousness. The task of the new populism is to substitute for the nation-state small autonomous organic communities federalized within a broader framework guaranteeing both cultural particularity and unimpeded economic interaction.



### *Multiculturalism as Bureaucratic Populism*

Liberal interpretations of populism, even sympathetic ones, have invariably fallen into the trap described over a century ago by Marx when he attacked the classical economists' uncritical usage of the concept "the people" for being guilty of what Adorno later described as "identity thinking." These interpretations naively assume that real people correspond to what the concept of "the people" normally describes, i.e., some homogeneous aggregation of "Americans" exhibiting all the WASP characteristics that have historically been associated with such a designation. As a result they hypostatize and substitute a set of particular populist values above and beyond all others, thus becoming vulnerable to charges of cultural imperialism and Eurocentrism.<sup>28</sup> Without any further concrete determinations concerning their particular cultures, habitats, languages, religions, ethnic origin, etc. "the people" remains an empty abstraction upon which to project arbitrary universal characteristics. By calling for concrete determinations, of course, Marx sought to clear the way for and legitimate his own favorite "determinations," i.e., class distinctions, as ontological features of reality. The point here is that the question whether significant differences do or do not obtain within a given population is never just an empirical nor even a theoretical but, first and foremost, a political one. Whether someone is a Croat or a Yugoslav, or whether it matters, cannot be established once and for all simply by looking at the facts. It requires a prior political determination of what will constitute relevant facts.

Marx' concrete "determinations" are ultimately a function of socio-economic practices informally developed over time and eventually sedimented in the collective consciousness of the particular communities they come to constitute. Within the canonical interpretations of most Marxist traditions and against the background of the devastating impact of the rise of capitalism and of the industrial revolution some of these practices, i.e., those related to production, have been privileged

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28. Even careful critics such as Dionne (*op. cit.*) fall into this trap when, after having gone to great pains to describe many of the irreconcilable issues that split the American electorate, in the last chapter of his book he tries to pull a rabbit out of his hat in the form of "the American political tradition," allegedly able to totalize magically all constituencies and reconcile all differences. Such reconciliations and totalizations can and have been successfully carried out by astute politicians for a long time, but at the price of depoliticizing politics and thus unintentionally pointing to this state of affairs as providing the answer to the question Dionne uses as the title of his book. Other attempts to recycle analogous republican politics, such as Lasch's, are more realistic and, consequently, end up with pessimistic conclusions concerning their chances of success.



as determining all others. Such a reading was encouraged by Marx himself, who spent most of his latter years reconstructing the logic of capital as the essence of modern historical development. Yet, to the extent that all these practices are ontogenetic and therefore inextricably connected with intersubjectivity, they constitute a *praxis* of which labor and production in general are only a special case.<sup>29</sup> They are always embedded in specific territorial and cultural contexts within which they receive their meaning as integral parts of a particular *nomos*.<sup>30</sup> Caught within the logic of his own account of the irresistible universalizing function of capitalism, Marx uncritically assumed the eventual totalization of all remaining *nomoi* into communist society, thus

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29. It is not an accident that, in his struggle against what eventually became the predominant philosophical positions of the Second and Third International, Antonio Labriola redefined Marxism as "the philosophy of praxis." Although Gramsci developed this approach in terms of what he sought to articulate as the particularities of national life and popular culture, the whole effort shipwrecked in subsequent crude economic reinterpretations of "cultural hegemony" as the equivalent of successful propaganda and of *praxis* as politically determined labor, i.e., as organizing. At any rate, Gramsci's project of cultural hegemony was an attempt to rationalize the traditional lifeworld, the existing *nomos*, on the assumption that such a rationalization would naturally take place along Marxist lines — an intellectualistic illusion not altogether different from Habermas' hope that the defense against the colonization of the lifeworld will automatically result in the universalization of the purposive rationality allegedly inherent in undistorted communicative practices. Cf. Paul Piccone, *Italian Marxism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983).

30. Although originally articulated by Heraclitus at the dawn of Western philosophy as the divine world order (Cf. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1965], pp. 151-184), *nomos* reappears in contemporary political theory through Carl Schmitt, who traces it back to the Sophists, before Cicero mistranslated it as *lex*, thus occluding its territorial, communitarian and traditional connotations. Schmitt, however, specifically articulated the concept in terms of the dissolution of the *jus publicum Europaeum* and its implications for his particular discipline, constitutional and international law. Cf. Carl Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1978). In his essay on "Nomos — Nahme — Name," [in Siegfried Behn, ed., *Der beständige Aufbruch: Festschrift für Erich Przywara* (Nuremberg: Glock und Ludz, 1957)], however, Schmitt traces language itself back to *nomos* and thus prefigures the Wittgensteinian themes of the *Lebensformen* and "language games," and Foucault's notion of *genealogy* as radical alternatives to abstract enlightenment universalism — what post-modernists call "logocentrism" and the elitist managerial ideology of late liberalism. Cf. also Ulmen, *Politischer Mehrwert*, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-317. Ulmen emphasizes how for Schmitt the concept of *nomos* unfolds in three stages: land appropriation, division and production. Its last configuration corresponds to Marx' notion of "the mode of production" without, however, following the orthodox Marxist degradation of the extra-economic "superstructure" to the level of an epiphenomenon. A populist concept of *nomos* would combine both the Marxist base and superstructure without serializing its particular manifestation within the unilinear theory of history dogmatically accepted by both Marxism and liberalism.



forgetting the ineradicable cultural constitution of his social individual, no matter how much he may farm in the morning, engage in social criticism in the afternoon and watch CNN in the evening. Other, more conservative 19th century thinkers (often engaged in defending aristocratic rule against the democratizing, universalizing and homogenizing implications of the French Revolution) took traditional *nomoi* as the foundation of nations which, in turn, totalized and formalized the organic relations they embodied into states.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, as a result of unexpected socio-economic disruptions, none of these national projects ever materialized. Thus there do not seem to be too many nations in existence today that fit this stringent description. At any rate, since WWI and the collapse of the *jus publicum Europaeum* it has become impossible to conceive of nations in this fashion since any effort to constitute them along these lines results in the marginalization and disenfranchisement of whatever minorities happen to inhabit the national territory. The result has usually been civil war, whenever the minorities are able to resist national homogenization, or occasionally genocide, when the minorities are too weak to fight back.

Today all nations are culturally heterogeneous and, as a result, their particular states find it increasingly difficult to reflect any particular *national* values, traditions or customs. Modern states are caught in the paradox of having to embody concrete values derived from some particular *nomos*, while their grounding in heterogeneous societies commits them to axiological neutrality and prevents them from admitting the privileging of any one *nomos* over all others. They can only claim to codify formal relations among abstract individuals within a minimalist axiological horizon able to serialize, without actually integrating various residual and often conflicting *nomoi*. But the very designation of abstract individuality as the fundamental social unit, or what exactly constitutes individuality and citizenship, betrays a commitment to a potential *nomos* reflecting the interests of intellectuals: Enlightenment values and, subsequently, New Class ideology. What is especially problematic in the US case is that the particular variation of this general Northern European outlook, the WASP ideology that became embodied in the federal

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31. Some subsequent articulations of Savigny's ideas focused on the *Volksgeist* and contributed significantly to 20th century racism and National Socialism. This outcome, however, is only one historical possibility among many. The alternatives are not limited to a contraposition of the abstract universalism of the Enlightenment and the irrational particularism of most 20th century conservative thought. For a possible synthesis along federal lines, see Paul Piccone and G. Ulmen, "Schmitt's 'Testament' . . ." *op. cit.*, pp. 26-28; and Ulmen, *Politischer Mehrwert*, *op. cit.*, pp. 74ff.



Constitution and, after the Civil War, determined the structure of the US as a nation, includes plurality, tolerance and autonomy as integral parts. Because of the growing demographic heterogenization resulting from both voluntary and, earlier, involuntary immigration, the original American identity necessitated its self-denial in the very process of becoming objectified in a nation-state. When the US as a nation began to codify its federal Constitution into the welfare state this paradoxical predicament resulted in an axiologically minimalist project whose realization presupposed the prior homogenization of its constituency. In carrying out this project of cultural homogenization, however, the welfare state did not generate a new *nomos* — since *nomoi* cannot be created by bureaucratic fiat — but only extended the existing one while having to deny its very existence.

In discussing the US in the closing pages of his *Verfassungslehre* (1928), Schmitt pointed out that the federal government could not recognize minorities as political entities since their claim to embody a particular *nomos* implied that they were nations *in nuce* and therefore incompatible with the existing and developing American nation.<sup>32</sup> The only approach he envisioned at that time was the one actually being followed by the government, i.e., to regard all members of these minorities merely as abstract individuals like everyone else. In the late 1920s such a solution was still viable only to the extent that the US was still in the early phases of transition from a federation *strictu sensu* to a nation. But as a contractual intra-national document — even if an inconsistent one based on *democratic* foundations (“We, the people . . .” instead of “We, the states . . .”) — the Constitution could not substitute for a national *nomos*. Even the most imaginative readings of the Bill of Rights could yield little more in the way of substantive values than the protection of a few rights of abstract individuals and the pursuit of happiness operationalized into consumerism. Thus it is not surprising that the final product of this long and painful process of building a nation out of the original federation, accelerated during the shift from entrepreneurial to state-organized capitalism under conditions of severe economic crisis, turned out to be a technocratic redistributive welfare state.

Lacking a viable axiological foundation clearly defining its mandate beyond a vague injunction to safeguard the stability of the system, the welfare state could not avoid remaking the constituency in its own image. Thus it continued the process of homogenizing and politically deactivating the populace not only in order to clientize and control it but also

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32. Carl Schmitt, *Verfassungslehre* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1970), pp. 388-391.



to create a market of homogeneous consumers for a state-regulated capitalism predicated on the deployment of new mass production technologies and a correspondingly homogenized labor force to meet the personnel requirements of the new system. The unintended consequence of this strategy, however, has been the deterioration of that sector of the population which could not, for whatever reason, participate in this project of rationalization and homogenization into state-dependent clients unable and/or unwilling to function as autonomous individuals; the transformation of the former middle class with ready access to educational institutions and professional skills primarily into a managerial elite supervising these new welfare state clients; and the upgrading of the old working class to real or imagined middle class status, to bear the costs and consequences of these developments. As long as the welfare state, through whatever legitimate or politically fraudulent means, could guarantee a steady growth and relatively high standards of living, populist discontent with cultural homogenization and the debilitating impact of state penetration of the lifeworld could be contained as marginal ideological disturbances or integrated by existing institutional mechanisms. This is essentially what has happened since the New Deal. But in a context of prolonged economic stagnation and growing cultural impoverishment no longer buffered by increasingly eroded familial or autonomous community networks — a distinct possibility for the foreseeable future — popular dissatisfaction translated into populist resentment may eventually force the existing system into undertaking substantial institutional reforms.<sup>33</sup>

The crisis of the welfare state has not gone unnoticed by the technocracy entrusted with managing it. Already in the early 1960s spontaneous ghetto uprisings in practically every major American city by disenfranchised blacks made it clear not only that the welfare state had lost touch with most of its alleged clientele, but also that government policies had undermined the various targeted constituencies' ability to represent themselves and thereby participate in the general project of

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33. This is precisely what happened to bureaucratic collectivist regimes which deployed similar strategies of social rationalization. The Soviet Union withered when a terminal economic crisis precipitated by the growing irrationality of a system no longer run by more or less autonomous individuals but by state-dependent *apparatchiki* gradually curtailed the central government's redistributive options. Although the current resurgence of populism is not predicated on standard theories of the economic crash (*Zusammenbruchstheorie*) — a trademark of the Second International's determinist outlook — to the extent that economic crises vividly document the system's shortcomings they tend to lend legitimacy to populist critiques.



social reorganization.<sup>34</sup> The advanced disintegration of residual *nomoi* in those sectors of the population most directly affected by state policies of cultural homogenization had become dysfunctional to the very running of a welfare state, which still projected the final mediatized result to be some sort of new national *nomos*. The technocracy seems to have realized that no new American *nomoi* can come into being by bureaucratic fiat: they can only be constituted through the spontaneous interaction of people in organic communities. At any rate, from the mid-1960s the technocracy has reversed its Americanization strategy and encouraged autonomous and government-sponsored reconstitution of disintegrated residual *nomoi* as a precondition to reestablish its own internal rationality. Such direct sociological interventions to reconstitute disintegrated or disintegrating communities with the assistance of professional organizers such as Saul Alinsky, the Office of Economic Opportunity encouraging and funding opposition groups to generate regulatory feed-back for an insulated and therefore irresponsive bureaucratic apparatus, the almost obsessive government supervised voter registration campaigns in the South to ensure the election of truly representative officials, etc. were all primarily bureaucratic attempts to reconstitute disintegrated *nomoi* to rationalize and legitimate an increasingly faltering welfare state. What this meant was forfeiting any hope of constituting any new national *nomos* other than one hypostatizing the bureaucratic apparatus as a permanent mediator among a myriad of conflicting artificially reconstituted traditional groups.

Unable to enforce the internalization of its mandates, this Great Society and post-Great Society welfare state strategy succeeded only in generating artificial negativity which, to the extent that it does not reflect the spontaneous expression of internalized norms, remains a

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34. Adolph L. Reed Jr. has explained these events precisely in terms of the bureaucratic destruction of residual *nomoi* understood not as parts of some mythical African culture buried in the collective unconscious but as internalized community practices developed over decades of struggling against institutionalized racism in the South. Cf. his "Black Particularity Reconsidered," in *Telos* (Spring 1979), pp. 71-93. From this, however, over a decade later Reed opportunistically concludes that, since racial oppression was part and parcel of government policies, it is the government's responsibility to remedy its consequences through more affirmative action and other programs which have, at best, only benefited a small upwardly mobile black middle class. See Adolph Reed Jr. and Julian Bond, "Equality: Why We Can't Wait," in *The Nation* (Dec. 9, 1991), pp. 733-737. Since the government cannot reconstitute any residual Afro-American *nomos*, Reed's call for more government intervention in the black community will probably succeed in securing a few more affirmative action appointments in prestigious universities, while contributing to further disintegration and dependence in the urban ghettos.



bureaucratic phenomenon extending and intensifying rather than containing and correcting bureaucratic involution. What these strategies succeeded in doing was primarily to extend the bureaucratic apparatus by creating a professional New Class counter-bureaucratic elite both to respond to and co-opt growing populist resentment by providing this opposition with officially sanctioned representative institutions. In Adornian terms the main outcome of this new version of the dialectic of enlightenment was to extend the domination of the concept in the form of an attempted bureaucratic reconstitution of cultural heterogeneity to legitimate and rationalize the welfare state. The project failed because these cultural traits did not denote dynamic living practices internalized by the various communities they constituted, but embellished memories having little relation to concrete social realities other than as legitimating ideologies for a rising multicultural bureaucracy in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, far from representing any spontaneous grass-roots phenomenon, multiculturalism is primarily another symptom of the involution of the welfare state.

But the welfare state cannot coexist with multiculturalism. Any serious vindication of particular cultures must resuscitate or invent autonomous *nomoi* whose articulation requires the constitution of corresponding nations with their own states — the kind of project undertaken with catastrophic consequences in Northern Ireland, Lebanon and, more recently, in what was Yugoslavia. On the other hand, anything short of nationhood, predicated on a plethora of conflicting criteria of language, race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., can only yield pressure groups advocating artificial particularity as career advancement strategies for often poorly qualified would-be state functionaries pretending to represent constituencies never substantially affected by these dynamics.<sup>35</sup> Thus, as a medicine to cure the ills of the welfare state, multiculturalism is either too strong, to the point that it threatens to kill the patient, or not strong enough, in which case it is socially irrelevant. In the first case the result is Yugoslavia, Lebanon, etc. In the second case, which more closely resembles the way the problem is articulated in the US, weak multiculturalism fails to provide alternative axiological foundations necessary for autonomous individuality and community reconstitution. Worse yet, it actually intensifies the crisis of the welfare state both by actually encouraging conformity while advocating an enforced diversity, and by legitimating contradictory and irreconcilable criteria for redistribution that render extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible, any equitable implementation.



### *Post-Liberal Populism*

As bureaucratically-coopted populism, multiculturalism cannot remedy the welfare state's axiological deficits because the reified heterogeneity it legitimates does not correspond to any spontaneously lived practices and only seeks to substitute for the administrative imposition of an *extraneous* homogeneity an equally *extraneous* heterogeneity. The problem with the earlier Americanization strategy, however, was not homogeneity as such. Rather, it had to do with the fact that it was administratively imposed. These efforts in the past half century have tended to accelerate the disintegration of remaining *nomoi* without actually substituting new ones, thus leaving in their wake a state of normlessness and community disintegration legitimating further bureaucratic intervention and the increasing tendential bifurcation of society into a New Class managerial elite and its disenfranchised clients — the liberal coalition that has displaced the traditional working class as the main constituency of the American Democratic Party.

No longer confident of being able to constitute technocratically a new *nomos* defining an American nation smoothly run by an efficient bureaucratic apparatus of New Class professionals, the welfare state's sponsorship of multiculturalism ends up relegitimizing existing relations of domination, privilege and socio-economic inequality by redimensioning the role of the central government.<sup>35</sup> Having feudalized culture into a *bellum omnium contra omnes*, the welfare state — itself pretending to proportionately represent the country's racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious etc. make-up — seeks to become the only neutral mediator able to adjudicate among the permanently warring factions in managing and redistributing the fiscally appropriated social surplus. But to the extent that this process of artificial multiculturalization directly affects only a small, although highly vocal and visible, upwardly mobile segment of the bureaucratic apparatus, leaving the rest of the newly designated cultural minorities as disempowered and alienated as ever, it cannot generate the kind of political constituency whose support it needs to remain in power. Growing populist opposition to its costs and questionable practices threatens to translate into demands for institutional reforms to redimension and decentralize this increasingly counterproductive and self-destructive bureaucratic apparatus, and thus to re-empower local communities to the point of creating conditions within which new *regional nomoi* can actually be reconstituted.

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35. Cf. "Special Section on Affirmative Action in Academia" in *Telos* 86 (Winter 1990-91), pp. 103-140.



Rather than reviving or inventing devisive idyllic visions of ethnic, gender or cultural particularity, the new populism focuses on the creation of new *nomoi* in terms of developing modes of interacting among people in the process of negotiating and renegotiating everyday life.

The new populism will have to part ways with its earlier manifestations precisely in this: it can no longer assume a pre-given national context and will have to refederalize the political system as a precondition for reconstituting local communities and concrete *nomoi* able to re-legitimate the democratic ethos. This means that cultural specificity will have to be defined entirely in *territorial* terms rather than ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic, and other criteria. Unresolvable within the instrumental rationality of a large centralized welfare state, the question of conflicting *nomoi* is more easily solved within small contexts where new *nomoi* can be constituted through direct interaction among people. After all, *nomoi* are never given once and for all, but are living entities constantly modified in the process of being articulated. If the significant political units are de-totalized into smaller ones allowing for concrete interaction and will-formation, then new *nomoi* can develop out of the old ones, as they always have in the past, in particular localities, as a result of the concrete interaction of various groups.

Civil wars in Lebanon, Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland are largely the results of efforts to universalize particularistic *nomoi* at the level of the nation-state where large chunks of the constituency have to be necessarily disenfranchised or marginalized rather than organically integrated in new formations which, to the extent that they are locally developed by the various peoples themselves, are automatically internalized. Interaction among differing cultures can never be codified by government policies without perpetuating indefinitely existing social divisions. While there is no guarantee that local communities will always invariably resolve smoothly whatever internal differences obtain, it is clear that bureaucratic imposition is no alternative — as can be seen from the resurfacing in the former USSR and in Eastern Europe of all the conflicts and internal divisions that communist governments repressed for decades by authoritarian decrees.

At any rate, notwithstanding the fact that the confusion of most recent discussions of the resurgence of populism have tended to substantiate standard liberal claims that it is the politically impotent expression of nativist resentment — a kind of anti-modernist reaction likely to wither in any serious confrontation with other more rational political positions — a federal, anti-bureaucratic populism may be on



more solid theoretical ground than standard liberal ideology predicated on the obsolete nation-state. As such, it presents a serious challenge to welfare state liberalism and, in an international context characterized by the dissolution of hitherto stable nations such as the USSR, Yugoslavia and even Canada, warrants careful scrutiny. Even West European nations, paradigms of national stability, are increasingly confronting the same sort of political crisis typical of all nation-states. The specter of populism haunts Western as much as Eastern Europe. While it is too early to prognosticate about possible developments, it is possible to examine one recent and still barely noticed political phenomenon which not only embodies the characteristics of a new federal populism but has also been registering spectacular electoral successes: the Lombard League in Northern Italy.

### *The Lombard League's New Federal Populism*

Explicitly opposed to Italy as a unitary nation-state, the Lombard League rejects the traditional post-Enlightenment plotting of the political spectrum along Left-Right axes, calls for the break-up of the country into three more viable sub-units, the abolition of existing party politics, the decentralization of the parties' *de facto* power base — the welfare state, and the constitution of new local *nomoi*. Unlike earlier populist movements originating in socially and economically backward regions such as the US South or the Russian countryside, and appealing to the least educated and most economically disadvantaged sectors of the population, the Lombard League has its roots in the most prosperous and industrially advanced part of Italy, draws most of its support from a rapidly growing, well-educated, middle-class and youthful constituency, and is being increasingly emulated by parallel political formations throughout the country. Although practically unknown outside Italy and generally dismissed by traditional parties and politicians as a temporary aberration, the one serious study of it so far has unambiguously concluded that not only is the Lombard League here to stay, but it is likely to grow significantly in the foreseeable future.<sup>36</sup>

Founded in 1982, the Lombard League takes its name from the opposition to Roman imperialism by the Gallic people inhabiting Lombardy at the time of Hannibal's invasion of Italy. Finally vanquished

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36. Renato Mannheimer, ed., *La Lega Lombarda* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1991), p. 194. Since the publication of this work, the League registered spectacular electoral successes in the fall 1991 local elections to the point of gaining a relative majority over all other traditional political parties in Brescia, probably Italy's most industrialized and prosperous city.



around 186 B.C. by the Romans, who eventually proceeded to integrate and assimilate the whole region into the flourishing Roman Empire under Julius Ceasar, the League was briefly reconstituted to fight against Frederick II in 1237, at which time it was once again defeated. In both instances the League stood for the kind of local autonomy that has been historically associated with prosperity and well-being, which declined whenever the region was forcibly subjugated by broader political units. It is this appeal to territorial autonomy that also characterizes the present League and defines the corrupt, wasteful and generally inept Rome-based Italian central government as its primary enemy.<sup>37</sup> According to Renato Mannheimer, one of the main factors contributing significantly to the League's formation has to do with the collapse of the Catholic and Communist sub-cultures which had dominated Italian politics since WWII,<sup>38</sup> and the growing irrelevance of traditional Left/Right divisions.

Although Catholicism remains strong at a subjective, idiosyncratic level, the growing secularization of society at large has clearly taken its toll. After the overwhelmingly onesided outcome of the divorce referendum it became obvious that official Catholic values and policies no longer have much direct political bearing on a still largely Catholic population and that the Christian Democratic Party was simply another center party concerned primarily with its own political clientele and its actual power base, the bureaucratic apparatus. An even worse fate befell communist ideology after the failure of Eurocommunism and the much heralded "historical compromise" whereby the Communist Party formally accepted the liberal rules of the game, rejected outright any residual notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat and, for all practical purposes, became just another run-of-the-mill social-democratic party. Notwithstanding notorious ambiguities about its relation to parliamentary democracy, the Italian Communist Party had always thrived on the pretense that it provided a qualitative alternative to "bourgeois" politics. After the formal break with Moscow, well before the beginning of *perestroika* and in the wake of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the Party gradually lost its historically distinct space within

37. *Ibid.*, p. 32. This negative evaluation of the performance of the Italian central government is by no means limited to the League, but is widespread. For a similar analysis from a New Class perspective concerned with merely rationalizing the existing system by substituting a decentralized "welfare society" for the present "welfare state," see Ugo Ascoli, "Dopo il Welfare State all'italiana," in *Problemi del Socialismo*, No. 5 (Rome: Francoangeli, 1992), pp. 157-175.

38. Mannheimer, *op. cit.* pp. 20-21.



the Italian political spectrum and simply came to duplicate other social-democratic parties which by that time had themselves become purely technocratic organizations with no particular ideological predilections. At that point the Party found itself without whatever attraction it may once have had both for that more idealistic part of its electorate still longing for radical changes and for its more traditional working class sectors for which sovietization remained irreversibly associated with modernization, equality and social justice. Thus it is no accident that with the beginning of the disintegration of the Soviet Union the Party has formally changed its name and split into two slowly dwindling splinter groups representing respectively these two different traditional constituencies.

Coming at a time of increasing political corruption, criminality and normlessness — and actually closely associated with these phenomena — the collapse of the Catholic and Communist sub-cultures left a vacuum in the national consciousness which the Lombard League has rushed to fill by appealing to a new collective identity<sup>39</sup> predicated on regional *nomoi*. It is its focus on territorial identity and, consequently, on the need to re-federalize a national structure that is slowly losing whatever original identity it may have once had that sharply distinguishes the League from other earlier traditional populist formations. This is the result both of political choices as well as of practical necessities. Since during the past five centuries Lombardy has been under successive Spanish, French and Austrian domination, and more recently has experienced considerable immigration, even if it wanted to the League could not possibly have been able to constitute itself around ethnic, linguistic or religious criteria.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, although

39. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

40. Cf. Gianfranco Pasquino, "Una Lega Contro i Partiti," in *Rivista dei Libri* (May 1991), pp. 32-35. Although early on there were some attempts to focus on local dialects and anti-Southern sentiments as the League's defining traits, they were readily dropped in the League's first formal Congress in 1989 in favor of a broadening of the criteria of who constitutes the people to include all of the region's residents. Cf. Roberto Biorcio, "La Lega Come Attore Politico: Dal Federalismo al Populismo Regionalista," in Mannheimer, *op. cit.*, pp. 68 and 81. It is obvious why such multicultural traits could not possibly work. Consider Milan, Lombardy's capital: there, until very recently, the residual aristocracy could be found speaking primarily French, the local working class conversing mostly in Milanese dialect, and only the middle class transacting in a more or less standard Italian. As Biorcio points out, along with all other regions today Lombardy cannot claim any distinct cultural particularity: "The existence of an autonomous Lombard culture based on a specific language and on specific traditions . . . is presently hard to find. The survival of ancient local traditions is . . . restricted to a very limited area." *Ibid.*, p. 68. It is precisely this heterogeneity of traditions and cultures that prevents the League from simply attempting to recycle some real or imagined



exhibiting all the typical characteristics of classical populist movements,<sup>41</sup> the League differs from previous versions in its emphasis on federalism and the reconstruction of viable communities locally and independently of any central authority such as the welfare state. As such, this federal populism avoids most of the pitfalls which historically prevented earlier manifestations of this phenomenon from translating into anything more than scattered and relatively impotent protest movements. Within a genuine federation the weight of the whole can be brought to bear on the constituting parts only under exceptional, well-defined conditions, thus preventing the homogenizing center from obliterating the particularity of the heterogeneous parts. To the extent that, in making their case, nationalist versions of populism, whether the New Right variety or the Azerbaijani, tend to universalize their particularity, they are usually defeated either by a center presenting itself as the protector of pluralism or by other hegemonic groups.

The Lombard League rejects outright the obsolete concept of the nation-state in favor of an integral federalism predicated on the constitution of new *nomoi* and the reconstitution of local communities as the social space within which to practice participatory democracy. Thus the main totalizing enemy is explicitly identified as the Roman bureaucracy and the central government and, according to Paolo Natale, voters' identification with the League is a function of "the lived solidarity of the subjects as an instrument to reactivate group identity and social recognition."<sup>42</sup> This vindication of grass-roots social communities as the constitutive units of a new federal populism confronts the problem of alienation and encourages reintegration of tendentially abstract individuals within organic communities conducive to responsible citizenship and a healthy social life. But in order to do so it must sharply define territoriality as decisive for the new populist identity. Since all political formations are constituted not only by what they include but, even more importantly, by what they exclude, the League's regional identity lends itself to standard misunderstandings. From the viewpoint of the predominant liberal conventional wisdom predicated on a society of abstract individuals externally aggregated

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vision of the past and commits it to the creation and development of new *nomoi* able to translate new needs and modes of interaction into new forms of social consciousness in a context where the Italian welfare state, the last vestige of an obsolete, residual 19th century nation-state, has shown itself clearly incapable of carrying out such a task.

41. Biorcio, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

42. Paolo Natale, "Lega Lombarda e Insediamento Territoriale: Un'Analisi Ecologica," in Mannheimer, *op. cit.*, pp. 118ff.



by a technocratic state, it is all too easy to misinterpret the League's exclusionary criteria predicated on territoriality as merely a recycling of nationalism, with all the racist, xenophobic connotations historically attached with such a notion — especially when all of Western Europe is becoming inundated with Third World or East European immigrants.

It is not surprising, therefore, that from the very beginning the Lombard League has been accused of racism and associated with Le Pen's National Front in France,<sup>43</sup> even though the Italian political situation is clearly not comparable to the French and careful voter surveys have shown that the League's territorial rooting is by no means the flip side of any hostility towards immigrants and other outsiders.<sup>44</sup> In fact, many of the League's members are themselves Southern Italian immigrants who have managed to establish solid roots in the region.<sup>45</sup> To the extent that one of the League's main goals is the constitution of new *nomoi*, which at this point exist only as what Ernst Bloch would have called "the not yet," i.e., in vague communitarian longings, rough

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43. Cf. Giorgio Bocca, *La Disunità d'Italia* (Milan: Garzanti, 1990); and Luciano Balbo and Ludovico Marconi, *I Razzismi Impossibili* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1990). For a particularly superficial and misinformed account, see Marco Martiniello and Paul Kazim, "Italy: Two Perspectives. Racism in Paradise?" in *Race & Class* (January-March 1991), Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 79-89. Kazim identifies the League as "an extreme right-wing group advocating separatism for the rich Lombardy region . . . and fanning popular resentment against immigrants." As evidence both Martiniello and Kazim provide a conspiratorial account of one of several incidents of the police break-up of a make-shift encampment of illegal jobless immigrants, allegedly to appease the extreme Right, i.e., the League. The clear implication is that these immigrants are essential to the hidden economy, but the racist local population is unwilling to treat them fairly and pay them a living wage. What actually happens is that illegal immigrants from disintegrating, poor Third World countries do make their way to industrial areas with occasional labor shortages in the more manual occupations, and local, usually social-democratic, authorities not only allow immigrants to come in but also to set up make-shift encampments with inhuman living conditions. The severe social problems and overload of already inadequate existing services these encampments create are directly felt by the local people, but generally ignored by the normally inept and unresponsive central government and local authorities. Most of the time the only way local residents can attract the authorities' attention and contain the various health and other social problems by providing the people in the encampments with minimal help is through acts of civil disobedience which are immediately perceived as racist. While some of the people involved may, in fact, be racist, by and large most League supporters want only a clear governmental policy regulating immigration so that those immigrants who do come are provided with at least minimal support. For a much more balanced analysis of the League which discusses most of these issues without distorting its program or its outlook, see Dwayne Woods, "Les Ligues Régionales en Italie," forthcoming in *Revue Française de Science Politique*.

44. Biorcio, who has specifically studied this question through extensive surveys of the Lombard League's constituency, has concluded that "the correlation of localism with anti-Southern feelings is statistically insignificant." *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

45. Natale, *op. cit.*, p. 119.



territorial contours and, negatively, in opposition to the central bureaucratic apparatus, the League's identity is likely to remain associated with its immediately visible exclusionary criteria and therefore vulnerable to charges of racism and ethnocentrism — especially from the traditional Left.

This adamant opposition from the traditional Left explains why the League has been and will continue to be seen as part of the Right by those whose political myopia is rapidly approaching blindness. Recent voter surveys show that the League's latest successes have been mostly at the expense of Center and Left-Center parties such as the Socialist, Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats.<sup>46</sup> Much less of an inroad has been made within the more traditional Left associated with the ruins of the former Communist Party. The reasons for this are not difficult to locate. Still committed to the central plan as the only way to rationalize and modernize the anarchy of capitalist production, and to a paternalistic redistributive bureaucratic apparatus as the only way to ensure social justice, the traditional Left can only shrink in horror on hearing about the League's program of practically demolishing the central government and decentralizing all social functions. Although the League consciously locates itself beyond any Left/Right division, its animating spirit is rooted both in a much older but largely forgotten Left anarchist tradition, as well as in the most advanced "post-Fordist" industrial practices which, not by accident, are very congenial to older anarchist forms of economic organization dating back to Proudhon. To a great extent, the unprecedented prosperity of Northern Italian regions today is largely a function of the gradual post-Fordization of production that has been underway over the past two decades. In many respects, the project of political federalization corresponds to a parallel project of industrial federalization which has already been implemented in some advanced sectors of Central Europe for some time.<sup>47</sup> Within such a context of industrial rationalization and decentralization, the old Left vision of huge factories with thousands of workers producing standardized products is definitely an anachronism.

The "transversal" character of the League can best be seen in the kind of people who vote for it. Although they come from practically

46. *Ibid.*, p. 107. Cf. also Umberto Brindani's interview with Umberto Bossi, the League's leader, "Macché Piccone. Bulldozer!" in *Panorama* (December 8, 1991), p. 45.

47. This is roughly what is happening within large multinational corporations such as IBM, which are slowly coming to realize how the myth of centralization and bureaucratization threatens to drive them into bankruptcy.



every strata of society, they are generally younger than the average voter, middle-class, well-educated, and entrepreneurial in orientation.<sup>48</sup> Far from being on the margins of society or the victims of social dislocations, the League membership has been described as an integral part (*lo zoccolo duro*) of the system.<sup>49</sup> When the League electorate is broken down according to classes, the only significant difference that could be found was that while the working class tended to emphasize regionalism as the League's most important feature, the better educated middle class focused instead on anti-bureaucratic opposition.<sup>50</sup> In a study of the large number of fringe sympathizers likely to vote for the League in future elections, Ilvio Diamanti came up with roughly the same results, with an "efficientist" wing of young people, middle class, "post-materialist," anti-party and anti-bureaucratic, and a "particularist" wing composed of older, working class, Catholic voters coming usually from right-wing parties.<sup>51</sup>

Since the Leagues are a political response to structural dysfunctions typical of all Italian regions and, more broadly but to a lesser extent, of all Western European regions, what all this means is the likelihood of the growth of similar regional Leagues throughout Italy and Europe in the immediate future. As comparable problems of bureaucratic inefficiency, unresponsiveness, waste, corruption and, most importantly, axiological deficits resulting from the vacuity of liberal democracy's Enlightenment universalism intensify, the kind of federal populism being developed by the Lombard League may well become the model for similar new political formations.

The paradox today is that while the disintegration of liberalism and the welfare state is triggering grass-roots phenomena such as the Lombard League in Northern Italy and corresponding populist responses elsewhere, Western Europe is attempting to unify along precisely the kind of standard welfare state parameters which are proving to be increasingly bankrupt, as they are predicated on the primacy of member nations and central bureaucratic authority. The question today is whether a new federal populism will proliferate fast enough to redirect the project of West European unification along decentralized federal lines and prevent Europe from reinventing Washington.

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48. Renato Mannheimer, "Chi Vota per la Lega?" in Mannheimer, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-134.

49. Biorcio, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

50. Mannheimer, *op. cit.*, pp. 1476-147.

51. Ilvio Diamanti, "Una Tipologia dei Simpatizzanti della Lega," in Mannheimer ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 178-182.